

# VU Research Portal

## Poor Women's Migration to the City

Pol, Lotte van de; Kuijpers, Erika

### ***published in***

Journal of Urban History  
2005

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1177/0096144205279198](https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144205279198)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Pol, L. V. D., & Kuijpers, E. (2005). Poor Women's Migration to the City: The attraction of the Amsterdam health care and social assistance in early modern times. *Journal of Urban History*, (1), 44-60.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144205279198>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

# POOR WOMEN'S MIGRATION TO THE CITY

## The Attraction of Amsterdam Health Care and Social Assistance in Early Modern Times

LOTTE VAN DE POL  
ERIKA KUIJPERS  
*University of Utrecht*

Early modern Amsterdam attracted large numbers of female immigrants. Their presence can be inferred from marriage registers and the city's substantial surplus of women. Knowledge of their exact numbers, of why they migrated, and of how they lived is, however, hard to come by. This article approaches their motives and perspectives through two case studies. The first concerns the migrating poor from Husum, a small town in northern Germany. The second probes the migration patterns and stories of the thousands of immigrant women convicted of prostitution as told before the Amsterdam courts. Female migration had many facets. Women migrated in all stages of their lives and for many reasons. Probably, most came looking for work, even if it was informal or illegal. Others were attracted by the relatively generous poor relief and free medical care Amsterdam offered, especially to pregnant women, a fact that seems to have been widely known.

**Keywords:** *migration; women; poor relief; prostitutes; poverty; pregnancy*

**On January 9, 1786, Maria de Vries, nineteen years old** and suspected of being a prostitute, was questioned before the criminal court in The Hague. In the course of the interrogation, she told the story of her life. Maria was born in a small village in Frisia, a northern province of the Dutch Republic. Her mother died young, and her father remarried. When her father died as well, her stepmother decided to try her luck elsewhere and took the girl with her to Amsterdam. There, she started a coffeehouse and Maria helped her. The stepmother, however, met a new man, who threw the girl out, telling her to find a place as a servant. Maria subsequently met the proverbial wicked procuress and soon found herself a prostitute in a closed brothel. She lived as a prisoner there but managed to escape. She fled Amsterdam and went to The Hague, where she again worked as a prostitute in a brothel. The next stage in her Harlot's Progress was contracting syphilis. Her madam fired her and gave her a guilder<sup>1</sup> in traveling money to return to Amsterdam and have herself cured in the Gasthuis, the city hospital. But Maria did not dare to return to Amsterdam; she was too afraid of the brothel keeper she had escaped from and to whom she was still in debt. She returned to Frisia instead, where she worked as an agricultural laborer. In the autumn, when the harvest was over and it was getting

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 32 No. 1, November 2005 44-60  
DOI: 10.1177/0096144205279198  
© 2005 Sage Publications

cold, Maria drifted back to Holland. Where else but in a prosperous city of Holland could she expect to find work, help, or, more important, treatment for her illness? She went to The Hague and after a few freezing nights on the streets gave herself up to the police, in the hope of thus being provided with shelter, food, and medical care.<sup>2</sup>

This is one story of female migration out of many in the Dutch judicial archives. It hardly fits, however, the patterns of female migration that we have become familiar with in the literature: married women migrating with their husbands and single women traveling to the cities to become servants. The stepmother in this real-life story went to Amsterdam as a widow, starting her own business there and finding a new husband. Maria failed to find a place as a servant. She was not so much an immigrant as a migrant, leaving Amsterdam for other cities and going back to the countryside in harvest time. Her story also demonstrates that the labor market was not the only attraction of a big city. Twice, she went or was advised to go to the city for free medical care.

Stories like that of Maria illustrate the arguments we want to make in this article. First, next to the numerous immigrants who settled in early modern Amsterdam, the city also attracted and housed many migrants, who moved to wherever there was a living to be made and who hardly integrated in the established society. We will argue that women made up a substantial part of this group. Second, the chances of obtaining poor relief or free medical care were important incentives for (im)migration, especially for women, who had more difficulties in earning their bread but easier access to poor relief than men.

These arguments are difficult to prove through systematic research. Much has to be inferred from scattered data and chance findings. We will approach the motives and perspectives of migrant women through two case studies: first, by looking at the immigrants from Husum, a small northern German town where traditionally many people decided to try their luck in Holland; and second, by looking at the life stories told by immigrant prostitutes before the Amsterdam and The Hague courts from 1650 to 1800.

The findings of these case studies should ideally be part of a general picture of early modern female migration. Such a picture, however, does not yet exist or does so only as a puzzle, in which so many pieces are lacking that the contours are still vague. The history of female migration has long been neglected. Recently, studies of modern female migration have been undertaken that show, for example, that in the nineteenth century, a great number of women migrated to the United States on their own, and that in modern times, a substantial part of labor migrants are women who work in domestic service, often on behalf of their families in their homelands.<sup>3</sup> In recent general overviews, however, migration of single women hardly merits more than some general remarks.<sup>4</sup> For the early modern period, information is especially scarce. Articles by Sogner, Fauve-Chamoux, Van de Pol, and others point to the probability that in early modern Europe, women must have formed a sizeable part of the migrant labor force.<sup>5</sup> How large that part was, who these women were, and what they

did are as yet not so clear. Presumably many set out to be domestic servants, but there must have been other types of female labor migration as well. To name one of the few examples, the Haarlem cloth bleacheries, an industry employing a substantial seasonal labor force, attracted women as well as men from Germany.<sup>6</sup> Migration was, as we will see, also a normal feature of the working life of an Amsterdam prostitute.

### FEMALE MIGRATION TO AMSTERDAM

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam became the third city of early modern northwestern Europe. Its population grew from about 30,000 in 1600 to 205,000 in 1670, reaching 240,000 by the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> This growth can only have been caused by large-scale immigration. During this entire period, the prospering coastal provinces of the Dutch Republic attracted large numbers of immigrants. The labor market in Holland was heavily dependent on both temporary and permanent immigration. These immigrants came from the other Dutch provinces but even more from abroad, especially from the German coastal areas and regions along the Rhine, from the Scandinavian coasts, and from the southern Netherlands.

There was no institution that registered newcomers, and exact numbers are therefore unachievable. In Amsterdam, however, there is a unique source, which allows insight into the extent of immigration: the registers of the marriage banns. In Amsterdam, everyone who wanted to marry had to give notice of their intended marriage at the town hall. These civic registers inform us of the names, places of birth, and ages of the couples. The clerks also wrote down the professions of the grooms but unfortunately, however, not of the brides. From 1600 to 1800, 650,000 people marrying for the first time appear in the registers: sixty percent of the grooms and 44 percent of the brides were *not* born in the city, and 36 percent of the grooms and 21 percent of the brides were not even born in the Dutch Republic (see Table 1). Among the foreigners, Germans formed the largest group.<sup>8</sup>

Although often treated as such, the marriage figures do not represent absolute numbers of immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Family migration is invisible here. People moved to Amsterdam at all ages and stages of their lives. Some people were already married, and some never married at all. The figures reflect the marriage market, a market that was different for natives and newcomers, for men and women. Even so, the figures show that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were at least 144,337 single female immigrants to the city: 75,765 from the rest of the Republic and 68,572 from outside the country.

In most early modern cities, the demographic balance favored women. In Amsterdam, this surplus was enlarged by the fact that Amsterdam was not only an immigration city but an emigration city as well. Men left the city as sailors, enlisting for the East and West Indies, two thirds of them never coming back.

TABLE 1  
Sex Ratios of Marriage Partners at First Marriage in Amsterdam, 1600-1800

Place of Origin	1600-1650			1651-1700		
	Men	(%)	Women	(%)	Sex Ratio	
Amsterdam	14,905	(26)	23,137	(43)	155	
Dutch Republic	16,351	(29)	13,817	(25)	85	149
Abroad	25,728	(45)	17,111	(32)	67	86
Total	56,984	(100)	54,065	(100)	95	61
						102
Place of Origin	1701-1750			1751-1800		
	Men	(%)	Women	(%)	Sex Ratio	
Amsterdam	41,422	(46)	57,817	(62)	140	144
Dutch Republic	18,734	(21)	18,823	(20)	100	117
Abroad	29,236	(33)	17,013	(18)	58	55
Total	89,392	(100)	93,653	(100)	105	108

SOURCE: S. Hart, "Geschrift en Getal. Onderzoek naar de samenstelling van de bevolking van Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw, op grond van gegevens over migratie, huwelijk, beroep en analfabetisme," in S. Hart, *Geschrift en Getal. Een keuze uit demografisch-, economisch- en sociaal-historische studien op grond van Amsterdamse en Zaanse archivalia, 1600-1800* (Dordrecht, 1976).

Due to this so-called Indian Leak, expelling many thousands of Amsterdam-born men and newly arrived male immigrants, among the lower classes the number of women far exceeded the number of men. The proportion of adult females to adult males in the poor neighborhoods of the city may have been as high as 3-2, at least from the end of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

For women in Amsterdam, therefore, opportunities for marriage were fewer than were those for men; as many as a quarter may have remained single. Immigrant women had the weakest position of all on the marriage market. They had to compete with native daughters with much more economic and social capital. For an immigrant craftsman, a marriage to an Amsterdam burgher's daughter was especially attractive. By such a marriage, the freedom of Amsterdam, which was required for admittance to the guilds and to set up one's own trade or workshop, and which would normally cost the equivalent of three months of a journeyman's salary, was given for free.<sup>11</sup> Amsterdam must have housed far more single female immigrants than are visible in the marriage registers and than is generally assumed. These women must have formed a large part of the anonymous female surplus among the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Immigrant women had a weaker position than native women on the job market. Newcomers were sometimes excluded even from the lowest female jobs in the Amsterdam economy. Peat carrying or the selling of fish in the market, for example, were public jobs available only to citizens. The pauper's trade of silk twining was done by Amsterdam girls who had learned the trade at the *Zijdwindhuis*, a municipal institution founded to provide for the daughters of the Amsterdam poor.<sup>13</sup> Sewing was—officially and uniquely—regulated in a female guild.<sup>14</sup> Much—perhaps most—of women's work was done in or for households, lodgings, inns, and workshops—as servants or as cleaners, taking in washing, nursing children or the sick, and repairing clothes. But to obtain a respectable job, one needed contacts, recommendations, and decent clothes. Lacking these, female immigrants would be restricted to the very lowest jobs, such as turning the wheels at diamond workshops, doing odd jobs for their own kinsmen, or finding their way in the more shady parts of the informal economy or even in dishonorable and criminal ways of living. Half of the convicted thieves in the second half of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam were women, the majority of whom were immigrants.<sup>15</sup>

The best chance for an immigrant woman was probably to secure a place as a servant. In the eighteenth century, Amsterdam counted at least 12,000 maid-servants.<sup>16</sup> Figures for the number of immigrants among them are lacking—indeed, little is known about them at all. Simon Hart has argued that servant girls especially came from the eastern provinces of the Republic and the German areas along the Rhine.<sup>17</sup> His statement, informed by the preponderance of brides coming from these regions, has been frequently repeated. Contemporary Dutch popular literature made fun of the “boorish and unwashed” girls who were said to come from Germany by shiploads to get themselves hired as

servants, and catchpenny prints depicting the lives of maidservants sometimes began by depicting their departure from Germany to Holland. Sølvi Sogner has attempted to follow the fate of female immigrants from Norway, a country with a long tradition of sending its young people to Holland, mainly to Amsterdam. From 1600 to 1800, no fewer than 4,750 Norwegian women, mainly from a few sparsely populated regions in the Southwest, married in Amsterdam—and this is, of course, a minimum number. Sogner assumes that most of these Norwegian girls were maidservants. This cannot be proven but is supported by contemporary Norwegian literature, in which one can read that it was widely believed that a maidservant in Holland could earn 100-120 guilders a year instead of the 3-4 guilders paid at home—a differential that was in fact highly exaggerated. Girls who had worked in Holland were recognizable by their clothes and manners as *Hollaendsker* and were popular as servants with the upper classes.<sup>18</sup>

There must have been more ways of earning a living for a single immigrant woman in Amsterdam—we still know far too little about women's work in early modern Dutch cities.<sup>19</sup> There was, however, a big difference with poor immigrant men. Apart from the fact that the scope of men's work was much wider, a man without connections or reputation could always enlist as a sailor or a soldier. A woman who had touched bottom had no such choice. The stories before the court testify to how easily a woman, like Maria de Vries, could be cheated by false promises of a respectable job or could slip from being a maid in a shabby harbor boardinghouse to being a prostitute in a brothel. There was a tradition of women who solved this dilemma by dressing up as men and enlisting as sailors or soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

Poverty was a female phenomenon: female-headed households formed a large segment of residential poor everywhere in early modern Europe. Women's wages were half (or less) of men's wages, and a single woman could only live on what she could earn if she shared a household.<sup>21</sup> A woman's income alone was hardly ever sufficient to keep a family, and pregnancy and the care of young children could make earning even a subsidiary income very difficult. In Holland, many households were headed by women whose husbands were at sea. For them, uncertainty came in two forms: breadwinners' contributions were at best uncertain, and the threat of widowhood was ever present. Such women constituted a large part of those receiving poor relief. Half of the Amsterdam "winter poor," who received extra assistance during the winter, were the wives and children of sailors.<sup>22</sup>

### MIGRATION OF THE POOR FROM HUSUM

The history of the north Frisian town of Husum,<sup>23</sup> a small harbor in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, was, like many other German towns on the North Sea coast, closely connected to the history of Amsterdam. Trade con-



tacts between Husum and Amsterdam went back as far as the late Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> In the seventeenth century, while Amsterdam prospered and became the center of world trade, Husum's economy went into sharp decline. At the end of the sixteenth century, Husum had approximately 4,500 inhabitants, but as the seventeenth century progressed that figure would be reduced by two thirds. In the second quarter of that century in particular, Husum went from decline to disaster. From 1626, when the warring factions reached Schleswig and Holstein, the Thirty Years War wrought havoc. In 1634, a devastating flood shattered all hopes for a short-term recovery. The prospering grain-producing island of Strand, nowadays Nordstrand, with more than 8,000 inhabitants, just facing Husum and an important source of the town's trade and wealth, was wiped off the map. Large areas along the coast of both North Friesland and Dithmarschen were inundated.<sup>25</sup> Entire villages disappeared; thousands of lives were lost, not to mention cattle and farming land. The recovery of the region's economy took many years and large investments.

Migration to Holland was a popular way out. In the seventeenth century, about one thousand men and eight hundred women from Husum and a number of villages in what is nowadays *Kreis* Husum had their first marriage registered in Amsterdam. Especially in the years following the flood, large numbers of North Frisians arrived in Amsterdam: a clear peak is visible in the 1640s and 1650s. These migrants were mainly of lower-class origin. A third of the Husum grooms stated their professions as sailors; most of the others were day laborers or had jobs as cobblers, coopers, or cloth shearers. The brides must have been of the same social class. People from Husum also appear in the archives of the Lutheran Church, in tax records, and in criminal archives.<sup>26</sup> It proved very difficult to track down the Amsterdam brides, grooms, criminals, or Lutheran church members in the Husum archives. As is often the case in early modern sources, record linkage is hampered by the fact that people from the lower classes had no registered last names but used patronymics or nicknames and often "Dutchified" their names.<sup>27</sup>

Immigrants to Holland have been found, however, in the financial archives of the Husum poor relief system.<sup>28</sup> Under the head of "unusual expenses," small amounts of money were noted by the town's treasurer that were given to poor travelers and inhabitants to leave the town and try their luck in Holland. The registers provide a few glimpses into the organization of these journeys. Sometimes, traveling money was paid directly by the poor office to the skipper.<sup>29</sup> In addition to a share in the costs of the journey, such as food and beer, some of the migrants received clothes or shoes. For the success of the migration, this was essential, for it was difficult to find a decent job dressed in rags.

Between 1619 and 1682, this help was extended to at least 320 people; the incomplete nature of the records precludes certainty beyond this figure.<sup>30</sup> Usually, handfuls of people—fewer than ten—were helped in this way every year. After the devastating flood of October 1634, however, numbers rose sharply. The administration book of the year 1635 unfortunately has disappeared, but



in 1636 seventy-six and in 1637 twenty-seven of the Husum poor left for Holland with the help of the town's charity chest; for several years, the number remained high.

Many of the Husum youngsters who received traveling money were children of parents who had been receiving poor relief for some time. A typical example is the family of the widow Christin Schoflicker. She had lived on charity since 1632 and had received poor relief for many years. In 1633, the poor register noted her qualification for relief as *Oldt und Swack* (old and weak). In 1636, a daughter left for Holland with financial help of the poor administration, to be followed eight years later by two sons who had been at school until that moment.<sup>31</sup> As in this example, most of the supported pauper families in Husum were headed by women. The Husum poor relief usually financed the education of their children and paid for their journey to Amsterdam.

These 101 sons, 21 daughters, and 19 children of poor Husum parents were probably sent away to learn a craft and work abroad. Temporary labor migration to Holland must have been quite common among Husum's youth. It can be assumed that many of these youngsters were successful in finding a job in Amsterdam or elsewhere in Holland. Young men could always find work as seamen. For women, the best chances on the labor market were as servants, and it may well have been that the girls were sent out to Amsterdam with addresses of contacts within the north German–Lutheran community. Some must have found husbands in Holland; others would, with luck, have come back with a dowry.

There were also forty-nine anonymous “poor children” (among whom were at least five girls) who were apparently without parents or other family ties in Husum—perhaps they lost their families in the flood. The aid they received was very small and may have been meant more to get rid of them than to help them. What prospects they had in Holland is not clear. In addition to the poor children, there were sixteen destitute women with thirty-eight children, and a small number of destitute families with a surviving father, who left for Holland. Finally, there were forty-one single men and twenty-five single women who applied by themselves; many of them were characterized as old, sick, or poor. Marina Söverin, for example, applied in 1629 for relief after her husband was killed in a storm at sea and she stayed behind with her child. She left for Holland in 1638, apparently alone.<sup>32</sup> And what is one to make of Catrin Clauses, who had been attacked by a dog with rabies and received 10 shillings' travel money?<sup>33</sup> Particularly in the years after the flood, many poor families were given traveling money: *Eine Arme Strandiger Fruw med 4 Kinder*, *Sike Jensen, eine arme Frau, so mit 4 klene kinder*, *En gebreckliche Fruw von Morsum, sambt 2 klene Kinder*, *Carin Cnutzen ein Strand. Fruw mit 5 klenen Kinder*, *Mariken Finken mit ihre kleine Kindern* (a poor woman from the island of Strand with four children, a poor women with four small children, and so forth).<sup>34</sup>

It was normal procedure in early modern Europe to give traveling money to migrant poor, to help them along on their way, on the condition that they left the city or parish. It was also not uncommon for poor relief or orphanage administrators to give traveling money to able-bodied native youngsters to help them try their luck in regions with more work. But it was quite a different matter to finance the journey of young orphans, women with children, and old, disabled, or sick persons, who would, without relatives or other social networks in Holland, sooner or later show up in front of the poor relief officers in Amsterdam. In all, it seems that Husum exported part of its poverty problem to Holland—or rather to Amsterdam, which was the only city that had such an indiscriminating and generous poor relief system, a fact that seems to have been known all over northwestern Europe.

### PROSTITUTION: A TRADE OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Poor immigrants, and especially poor female immigrants, become visible as individuals in very few sources.<sup>35</sup> One of them is the judicial sources. In Amsterdam, from 1650 to 1750, 8,099 trials were conducted for prostitution, giving information on 4,633 women convicted as prostitutes. The place of birth was always noted, allowing us to compare the immigration of a group of young women who had succeeded in what was felt to be women's goal in life (namely, the brides) with a group of young women who had conspicuously failed to do so (namely, the prostitutes). Any overlap between the two was small. A comparison of their places of birth demonstrates that whereas the majority of the brides were Amsterdam-born, the majority of the prostitutes were immigrants (see Table 2).

Most young women convicted as prostitutes had, at some point, left their hometown or village and headed for Amsterdam. What was their history? What were their motives, their dreams, their expectations? Many women gave a glimpse into the stories of their lives before the courts—although few were as elaborate as the Frisian Maria. This information is not always connected to prostitution. Most of the convicted women only became prostitutes in Amsterdam—or so they said. But their migration patterns may not have differed much from those of other female migrants, especially those with little chance of settling successfully in Amsterdam.

The information given by the prostitutes is difficult to quantify. Although the majority of the Amsterdam trials are from the seventeenth century, most of the detailed information on individual lives dates from the eighteenth century. In addition, the most extensive interrogations have been found in the criminal archives of The Hague in the eighteenth century, when fewer than a hundred women were questioned for prostitution. Significantly, most of the women tried in The Hague had lived for a time in Amsterdam. That is proof itself of the wandering existence these women led and the importance of Amsterdam in

**TABLE 2**  
**Place of Birth of Brides at First Marriage and**  
**Prostitutes at First Conviction in Amsterdam, 1650-1750**

Born in	1650-1699		1700-1749	
	Brides (%)	Prostitutes (%)	Brides (%)	Prostitutes (%)
Amsterdam	57	21	62	28
Dutch Republic	22	50	20	43
Abroad	21	29	18	29

SOURCE: Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1996), 103.

their wandering. A second problem is that the prostitutes' answers to the questions are not to be taken at face value. Before the court, the women constructed the stories of their lives with the aim of impressing the judges and of being declared innocent—maybe also of convincing themselves. Their tales of seduction and betrayal, and their portrayal of themselves as poor orphans and their fate as forced on them, may not always have been true. Also, their stories were usually the answer to the question of how they became prostitutes, not how they came to Amsterdam.

According to the stories, which are not quantified here, there were two types of immigrant prostitutes: those who said that they had come to Amsterdam first and became prostitutes afterwards, and those who had arrived as prostitutes or with the intention of becoming one. The latter can be considered as labor immigrants: they tended to travel from town to town, selling themselves (or being sold) as fresh articles everywhere. They often came by fixed and organized routes ending in or passing through Amsterdam. Prostitutes from the Dutch-speaking parts of the southern Netherlands would come via Brussels, Antwerp, Breda (a Dutch garrison town), and The Hague to Amsterdam. German prostitutes, coming by ship, had in some cases already been convicted in ports like Hamburg and Bremen. Their traveling costs had sometimes been paid for by a brothel keeper in Amsterdam or by a skipper who invested in this kind of trade as an extra source of income. Their voluntary migration has already been mentioned; many, however, also left Amsterdam involuntarily because their trade was a penal offense, and when arrested they were often banished from the city.

There were also two different types of journey. Those coming by sea would come straight to Amsterdam. Traveling over land, many arrived in Amsterdam by less direct routes as a natural last stop on a longer journey. Petronella Krops, a girl born in Bonn in the mid-eighteenth century, is a good example of the latter. She left home to be a servant in Dusseldorf and later in Wesel, each job bringing her closer to the Dutch Republic. Eventually, she ended in Amsterdam, where she first became a servant in a boardinghouse, only later becoming a prostitute. When she was arrested and banished from Amsterdam, she went to The Hague and plied her trade there.<sup>36</sup>

Asked why they left home in the first place, prostitutes typically told two types of stories. One was that of a village girl being seduced and made pregnant out of wedlock. After the birth, the baby was left behind and the mother left to start afresh elsewhere, often first finding work as a wet nurse, drifting in stages toward Holland, where money could be earned to send home for the care of the child. The other story is that of being seduced into running off with a man who promised marriage. In this case, the tendency was to head for Amsterdam straightaway. In Amsterdam, the money ran out or the man's promises proved false. The man enlisted for the East India Company, leaving his girlfriend to fend for herself in the kind of disreputable lodgings they had stayed in together in the harbor district. He sometimes placed her in a brothel himself after giving her a farewell present of a set of fine clothes—as capital for a career in prostitution.

A recurrent theme in the life stories is the broken home. The death of one or both parents often meant unhappiness and abuse, wicked stepmothers, and ill treatment in orphanages. No wonder the girl fled her hometown—in fact, the women who decided to dress and live as men often told of similar childhoods.<sup>37</sup> In view of the high age of marriage and the high mortality then prevalent, these must have been common; Maria de Vries, again, is an example here. There are other stories, like forced imprisonment in monasteries and abduction by gypsies. Not all are fiction—in one case, the abduction by gypsies was actually proved—but all these stories emphasize the woman's innocence and her being a victim. That, of course, was part of the performance before the judges.

Seduction and betrayal, the loss of her good name by pregnancy out of wedlock, and running away from a broken home may well have been typical for these (prospective) prostitutes. As far as we know, the girls were usually from lower-class backgrounds, so poverty and unemployment at home and the hope of accumulating a dowry by working in Holland, where wages were high, must often have been incentives too. This, however, is not spelled out in their stories before the court.

Among the pull factors mentioned, one was the entertainment and excitement offered by the big city. A poor men's (or poor women's) tourism existed, exemplified by the crowds attracted by the September fair. Several women told how they had originally come to Amsterdam for the fair and had never returned. Anna Catryn van Drongelen, for example, a servant from Den Bosch in Brabant, went in 1658 to the Amsterdam fair and was tricked into prostitution by the woman with whom she traveled.<sup>38</sup>

Prostitutes did not and could not expect to qualify for the poor relief handed out by the charity system in Amsterdam. Still, there are institutions that do recur in their histories: in the first place, the *Gasthuis* (hospital), where women could deliver their babies; the *Aalmoezeniershuis*, or Almshouse, with its large orphanage; the *Pesthuis*, where syphilis and other contagious diseases were treated; and the *Verbandhuis*, where wounds and fractures were treated. All these institutions were free and offered help indiscriminately.

### THE AMSTERDAM SYSTEM OF POOR RELIEF

In 1578, the city of Amsterdam joined the revolt against the Spanish king, the overlord of the Netherlands, and embraced the Reformation. Thereafter, there were many congregations in Amsterdam, which had to provide social assistance for their own members or communicants.<sup>39</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church was the most important of all, with the main charity chest in town. They only assisted church members, but from 1599 onward, an increasing period of membership was demanded to qualify for their poor relief (six months in 1636, one year in 1647, two years from 1651 onward, and, after 1701, four years).<sup>40</sup> Some of the other churches had limited resources to start with, for example the Lutheran Church, with its many poor German and Scandinavian immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

Besides these church chests, the city housed the sick, the aged, and orphans in several ancient hospices, and two civil chests, administered by the so-called *Huiszittenmeesters*, provided outdoor relief for residential burgher families and inhabitants who did not receive charity from a church. The city was in the first place responsible for its own burghers, and in the second place for other stable residents. By 1650, the *Huiszittenmeesters* only assisted those poor who could prove that they had lived in the city for four (and by 1651, six) successive years.<sup>42</sup>

Residence and citizenship were not the only criteria. Both civic and church charity helped only the “deserving” poor, those who were destitute through no fault of their own, such as the sick, the aged, the disabled, and orphans. As a final condition, these poor had also to be “deserving” in a moral respect: they had to be of good conduct and reputation.

In principle, therefore, poor newcomers—let alone women as disreputable as prostitutes or unmarried mothers—could not expect to be taken care of by the Amsterdam system for public charity, at least not during the first years after their arrival. The most they could officially expect was a three days’ stay in the city’s guesthouse for poor travelers (the *Bayerd*) and some traveling money to go elsewhere. In reality, however, several groups of immigrants received help. Among these were Protestant refugees. From the 1620s onward, the Thirty Years War forced thousands of Germans to flee the German Empire. Complaints to the Amsterdam council in 1633 and 1642 indicate that civil charities in these years got into financial difficulties for assisting poor refugees from Germany.<sup>43</sup> Apparently, these refugees and other immigrants did indeed receive aid, irrespective of the residency laws. After 1684, Huguenot refugees from France received ample assistance to help them settle in Amsterdam.

But there were also institutions that helped the poor irrespective of their background and even if they were “dishonorable.” The most important of these was the *Aalmoezeniershuis*, an institution founded in 1613 originally to clear the Amsterdam streets of (alien) vagrants and beggars. The Almoners also took care of children: orphans not accepted elsewhere, foundlings, and

deserted and vagrant children picked up from the streets. They placed them in private families and from 1665 onwards in their own orphanage, a huge building that by the end of the century housed some 1,400 children. The Almshouse also gave outdoor relief to those who were excluded by both the churches' chests and by public charity, at least until 1682. In theory, newcomers were not assisted for the first two years after their arrival. In practice, they sometimes received help sooner. This certainly was the case for pregnant women. New mothers received six guilders a week—a weekly wage for a journeyman—for a period of four weeks.<sup>44</sup> The city's hospital, the Gasthuis, was also free for all. The women's section was much bigger than the men's and housed a maternity ward. This attracted poor pregnant women from outside the city.

"Large numbers of travelers and strangers arrive here from all places," the Almoners told the Burgomasters in 1649, going on to observe, "After having spent a certain time on the streets, they finally get registered as residential poor and stay at our expense." They also complained that hundreds of pregnant women asked for assistance every year and that thousands of guilders were paid to women in childbed.<sup>45</sup> In 1686, the Almoners noted that certain women in the city sheltered pregnant women and instructed them on how to get as many alms from the hospices and charity institutions as possible for a share in the revenues.<sup>46</sup> An additional problem was that some mothers tried to leave children in the care of the Almoners: they sneaked out of the hospital after the birth and simply left their baby behind.<sup>47</sup> Some mothers even came to Amsterdam for the purpose of abandoning their child.

These complaints are confirmed by stories told before the court. Johanna Jans Hendriks, for example, an eighteen-year-old knitter, had walked from Utrecht to Amsterdam, begging her food on the way. Arrested on the (false) suspicion of streetwalking, she declared that she had been looking for the Gasthuis. After the delivery, she had planned to return home.<sup>48</sup> Mari Jans, a nineteen-year-old girl born in Rotterdam, told that she had been made pregnant and abandoned by her Rotterdam boyfriend; she had come to Amsterdam to deliver her baby in the Gasthuis. She had remained in Amsterdam and earned her living as a prostitute.<sup>49</sup> Susanna Messer, a Frenchwoman and a soldier's widow, had taken the night barge from Utrecht to abandon her child in Amsterdam. Discovered, she pleaded to the angry bystanders that she had done this out of poverty. She had planned to go back to Utrecht and go into service. Once she had earned enough money, she would come back and fetch the child.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, foundlings were often provided with a token by which they could be recognized. The problem, however, was that the child could only be retrieved when the bill for its education was paid, which poor parents could not afford.

The knowledge that in Amsterdam there was the possibility of delivering your illegitimate baby, collecting some money, leaving the child to be cared for in an orphanage in one stroke, and, with some luck, coming back to your hometown with your reputation intact must have been widely known. That this



knowledge was also widespread outside the Dutch Republic is seen from the example of Peter Sievertz, a man from the North Frisian Landschaft of Eidersstedt who in 1644 was fined because he had impregnated his servant and, instead of marrying her, had secretly sent her to Holland to deliver—and leave—the child there.<sup>51</sup> No wonder the regents of the Aalmoezeniershuis, who every year paid thousands of guilders in maternity benefits, described many of the recipients as “beggars, who only come to Amsterdam to get rid of their child.”<sup>52</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The early modern migration of single women has long been neglected. This neglect can partly be explained by preconceptions about migration as a male phenomenon and also by the poor visibility of poor, single, and migrant women in historical records. The Amsterdam marriage registers are unique in letting us see tens of thousands of immigrant women who married in the city. There must, however, have been many more female immigrants who did not marry, who lived in the poorest neighborhoods of the town, who tried their luck elsewhere and came back again; who, in fact, were members of the migrant poor. A substantial number of them ended before the courts as prostitutes or thieves.

Female immigrants are traditionally supposed to be single and to look for a place as a servant, with the goal of saving money to take home again or of finding a husband in town. There were, however, other sectors in which they could earn a living. And there were also other types of female migration. Women migrated at all ages and all stages of their lives. The Husum poor registers reveal that even women with children packed up in times of crises and undertook the long journey. The example of Maria de Vries's stepmother shows that one could start a new life in Amsterdam as a widow. Not only young single women who could hope for a job but also older and even sick women tried their luck in Amsterdam, sometimes helped on their way by the administrators of the poor in their hometown. They probably were attracted not only by Amsterdam's labor market but also by existing social networks of relatives or compatriots. But the knowledge of the generous Amsterdam poor relief system must have been important, too, for them and for the poor relief administrators who sent them on their way.

The life stories told by women arrested for prostitution before the court tell of still other motives. These women mention broken homes, seductions and false promises, unwanted pregnancies, and loss of reputation. The anonymity of the big city and the possibilities offered by the large informal economy, and even of the criminal underworld of Amsterdam, must have attracted them. A constant among push factors for female emigration appears to have been unwanted pregnancy.<sup>53</sup> Many also tell stories of coming to Amsterdam to



deliver their baby, or even abandon their child or get cured at the hospital. Although institutions for the sick and destitute were to be found in all Dutch cities, the admissions policy of Amsterdam institutions apparently was such that the poor traveled to Amsterdam from other Dutch cities, even in an advanced state of illness or pregnancy. Knowledge of the charity system must have been an important consideration for the migration of women.

## NOTES

1. One guilder was approximately what a male laborer earned per diem.
2. Algemeen Rijks Archief (hereafter, ARA), Hof van Holland (hereafter, HvH), January 9, 1786, 5531-17.
3. The most recent overview is P. Sharpe, ed., *Women, Gender and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives* (London, 2001), esp. the introduction by Pamela Sharpe, 1-15; and Christiane Harzig, "Women Migrants as Global and Local Agents. New Research Strategies on Gender and Migration," in Sharpe, *Women, Gender and Labour Migration*, 15-28. See also the essays by Suzanne M. Sinke, Joy K. Lintelman, Silke Wehner, and Deirdre M. Mageean in the section on women's migration in Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagler, eds., *People in Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective, 1820-1930* (Cambridge, 1995).
4. Recent overviews include Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, N.C., 2002); Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, eds., *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern, 1997); Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung. Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2000); and Nicholas Canny, *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration, 1500-1800* (Oxford, 1994).
5. S. Sogner, *Ung I Europa. Norsk ungdom over Nordsjøen til Nederland i tidlig nytid* (Oslo, 1994); summarized in English in S. Sogner, "Young in Europe around 1700: Norwegian Sailors and Servant-Girls Seeking Employment in Amsterdam," in *Mesurer et comprendre. Mélanges en l'honneur de Jaques Dupaquier*, ed. J. P. Bardet, F. Lebrun, and R. le Mée (Paris, 1993), 515-32; A. Fauve-Chamoux, "Les femmes qui migrent au loin (1500-1900): Vie nouvelle ou guillotine sèche?" in Bardet, Lebrun, and le Mée, *Mesurer et comprendre*, 195-206; and L. C. van de Pol, "The Lure of the Big City: Female Migration to Amsterdam," in *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, ed. E. Kloek, N. Teeuwen, and M. Huisman (Hilversum, the Netherlands, 1994), 73-81.
6. S. C. Regtdoorzee Greup-Roldanus, "De vrouw in een oud-Hollandsch plattelandsbedrijf," in Wantje Fritschy, ed., *Fragmenten vrouwengeschiedenis*, vol. 1 (Den Haag, the Netherlands, 1980), 44-56.
7. Hubert Nusteling, *Welvaart en werkgelegenheid in Amsterdam 1540-1860* (Amsterdam, 1985), ch. 2, 51.
8. These registers have been worked out and counted under the direction of Simon Hart. The results have been published in S. Hart, "Geschrift en Getal. Onderzoek naar de samenstelling van de bevolking van Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw, op grond van gegevens over migratie, huwelijk, beroep en analfabetisme," in S. Hart, *Geschrift en getal. Een keuze uit demografisch-, economisch- en sociaal-historische studiën op grond van Amsterdamse en Zaanse archivalia, 1600-1800* (Dordrecht, 1976), 115-81. The marriage registers were kept from 1578 to 1811. All data from these registers are taken from "Geschrift en Getal," especially 135-43.
9. Different authors have tried to calculate the absolute number of immigrants, but the outcomes are disputed. Nusteling, *Welvaart*, 42, for example, calculated the number of immigrants in the years 1601-1675 at 267,000 and in the years 1676-1750 at 63,000.
10. Calculation of this surplus in Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1996), 106-11.
11. For the advantages of citizenship, see also Erika Kuijpers and Maarten Prak, "Burger, ingezetenen, vreemdeling. Burgerschap in Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw," in *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21e eeuw*, ed. J. Kloek and K. Tilmans (Amsterdam, 2002).
12. For the argument and calculations in this paragraph, see van de Pol, "The Lure of the Big City."
13. Practically all silk-twiners found in the judicial archives were born in Amsterdam. Lotte van de Pol, *Arme vrouwen van Amsterdam* (forthcoming).

14. Bibi Panhuyzen, *Maatwerk. Kleermakers, naaisters, outkleerkopers en de gilden (1500-1800)* (Amsterdam, 2000), 209-13. This concerned, however, only the sewing of woollen garments for women and children.
15. Lotte van de Pol, "Vrouwencriminaliteit in Amsterdam in de tweede helft van de 17<sup>e</sup> eeuw," *Tijdschrift voor Criminologie* 29 (1987): 148-55.
16. A rough estimation based on the official registration of all servants counted in H. Diederiks, *Een stad in verval. Amsterdam omstreeks 1800* (Amsterdam, 1982), 349-50. In the Dutch cities, servants were for the largest part female.
17. Hart, "Geschrift en getal," 122.
18. Sogner, "Young in Europe," 521.
19. For an overview, see Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge, 1997), 596-606. A few important studies have appeared since: see Panhuyzen, *Maatwerk*, 177-239, on seamstresses; Hilde van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de kost. Armenzorg, arbeid en onderlinge hulp in Zwolle 1650-1700* (Amsterdam, 2000) and Ingrid van der Vlis, *Leven in armoede. Delftse bedeedden in de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 2001), because their work on the poor and poor relief offers many insights into the work of poor women; and van de Pol, *Arme vrouwen van Amsterdam* (forthcoming), wherein judicial archives are the main source.
20. Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1989).
21. On women's wages in Amsterdam, see van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*, 112-13; on single women in general, see J. M. Bennett and A. M. Froide, eds., *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia, 1999), esp. Merry E. Wiesner, "Having Her Own Smoke: Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany, 1400-1750," 192-216, and Amy M. Froide, "Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England," 236-69.
22. Amsterdam Municipal Archive (hereafter, GAA) 349, Archive of the *Huiszittenhuizen van de Oude en de Nieuwe Zijde*, inv.nr.1, *Huiszittenmeesters Oude Zijde 1639-1703*, Maart 1681, f.148-155, f.166.
23. Erika Kuijpers, "Migrantenstad: Immigratie en sociale verhoudingen in 17e-eeuws Amsterdam" (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2005). The Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) funded her visit to Schleswig-Holstein in 2000.
24. See, for example, U. Lange, ed., *Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins. Von Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Neumünster, Germany, 1996); A. Bantelmann, A. Panten, R. Kuschert, and Th. Steensen, *Geschichte Nordfrieslands* (Heide, Germany, 1995); and H. Menke, ed., *Die Niederlande und der europäischen Nordosten. Ein Jahrtausend weiträumiger Beziehungen (700-1700)* (Neumünster, Germany, 1992).
25. Literature on the 1634 flood is abundant; to name just a few titles, see B. Hinrichs, A. Panten, and G. Riecken, *Flutkatastrophe 1634. Natur, Geschichte, Dichtung* (Neumünster, Germany, 1991); W. Hansen, *Die nordfriesische Sintflut: Untergang der Insel Strand Anno 1634* (Husum, Germany, 1984); and K. Kuenz, *Nordstrand nach 1634: die wiedereingedeichte nordfriesische Insel* (Singen am Hohentwiel, Germany, 1978).
26. Lotte van de Pol counted nine prostitutes born in Husum in the Amsterdam criminal records between 1650 and 1749.
27. Sogner, "Young in Europe," 518; and van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*, 43.
28. Mr. U. Boyens, archivist of the Church Archives of the Kirchenkreis Husum-Bredstedt, spent many hours trying to identify Amsterdam immigrants in the *Kirchenbücher* and also found the notes on the leaving poor in the Husum financial administration discussed here. I (Erika Kuijpers) am most grateful to him for all the work he has done for this project.
29. See, for instance, the Armenrechnung from April 21, 1636, and June 23, 1636.
30. The 320 recipients were broken down as follows: 188 men and boys, 75 women and girls, and 57 children of unknown sex. Stadtarchiv Husum, Armen- und Kämmerei-Rechnungen Husum, nr. D2A 1 (1619)–D2A 52 (1682).
31. Armenregister 1632-118, 1633-87, 1637-115, 1638-96, 1639-109, 11640-76, 1641-21; and Armenrechnungen, April 21, 1636, and March 23, 1644.
32. Armenregister 1629 nr. 27; and Armen en Kämmerei-Rechnungen, March 13, 1638.
33. *Ibid.*, March 1680.
34. Armenrechnung, March 11, 1637, August 16, 1637, June 6, 1636, May 12, 1641, and July 10, 1657.
35. Based on information published in Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*, especially ch. 4; and L. van de Pol, *Arme vrouwen van Amsterdam* (provisional title, forthcoming), a study based on a collective biography of the approximately 5,500 convicted prostitutes and madams in Amsterdam from 1650 to 1750.

For this section, prostitutes arrested in The Hague in the eighteenth century and tried before the Hof van Holland were also researched.

36. ARA, HvH, 5498-20, May 24, 1771.
37. Dekker and van de Pol, *The Tradition*, ch. 1.
38. GAA, Rechterlijk Archief (RA) 312 f. 258, July 31, 1659.
39. O. P. Grell and A. Cunningham, "The Reformation and Changes in Welfare Provision in Early Modern Northern Europe," in *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500-1700*, ed. O. P. Grell and A. Cunningham (London, 1997), 1-42. See, for an overview of the variation in organization of welfare and poor relief, M. Prak, "Armenzorg 1500-1800," in *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in de Nederlanden vanaf de Middeleeuwen*, ed. Jacques van Gerwen and Marco van Leeuwen (Amsterdam, 1998), 49-90.
40. On the criteria of Reformed Church relief, see for example S. Groenveld, "'For the Benefit of the Poor': Social Assistance in Amsterdam," in *Rome \* Amsterdam. Two Growing Cities in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. P. van Kessel and E. Schulte (Amsterdam, 1997), 192-208, 200.
41. Erika Kuipers, "Poor, Illiterate and Superstitious? Social and Cultural Characteristics of the 'Noordse Natie' in the Amsterdam Lutheran Church in the Seventeenth Century," in *Dutch Light in the 'Norwegian Night': Maritime Relations and Migration across the North Sea in Early Modern Times*, ed. L. Sicking, H. de Bles and E. des Bouvrie (Hilversum, the Netherlands, 2004).
42. GAA 5025, Vroedschapsresoluties (Resolutions of the City Council), inv.nr.19, October 28, 1650, f.121.
43. Ibid., inv.nr.16, November 17, 1633, f. 26; and ibid., inv.nr.17, November 24, 1642, f.146v.
44. Ibid.
45. GAA 343, Archive of the Aalmoezeniers, inv.nr.29, May 10, 1649, fos.18v-19v.
46. Ibid., 24-4-1649, f.24. H. O. Heerma van Voss, "De armenzorg te Amsterdam in de 17e eeuw" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1958), 25.
47. I. H. van Eeghen, "Van gasthuis tot academisch ziekenhuis," in *Vier eeuwen Amsterdams Binnengasthuis*, ed. D. de Moulin, I. H. van Eeghen, and R. Meischke (Amsterdam, 1981) 47-104, esp. 81-82.
48. GAA, RA 360 f. 190, December 12, 1709.
49. GAA, RA 339 f.85vo, August 4, 1693.
50. GAA, RA 361 f. 135vo-136, June 20, 1713.
51. Silke Götsch, "'... für ein Holländer gescholten...': Wiedertäufer in Eiderstedt im 17. Jahrhundert," *Kieler Blätter zur Volkskunde* 16 (1984): 5-29, 11.
52. GAA 343, Archive of the Aalmoezeniers, inv.nr.29, May 10, 1649, fos.18v-19v, 24.
53. See also Susanne Dettlaff, "Sittliche Verstöße und niedergerichtliche Straftätigkeit: Aufschlüsse aus Brucheregistern in schleswig-holsteinischen Amtsrechnungen," in *Volksleben, Kirche, und Obrigkeit in Schleswig-Holstein von der Reformation bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Neumünster, Germany, 1989), 309-435; and Rachel G. Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch, "Pregnant, Single and Far from Home: Migrant Women in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1007-31.

Lotte van de Pol is a fellow of the Fredrich Meinecke Institute of the Free University of Berlin, where she researches diary writing at European courts at the end of the Ancien Régime. She is also affiliated with the Research Institute for History and Culture at the University of Utrecht. Among her publications on early modern women, poverty, and prostitution are: *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom: Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1996) and, together with Rudolf Dekker, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London 1989).

Erika Kuipers has published her dissertation, *Migrantensta: Immigratie en sociale verhoudingen in 17e-eeuws Amsterdam* (Hilversum, the Netherlands, 2005), on the settlement of labor migrants in seventeenth century Amsterdam. Her current work at Utrecht University focuses on the rise, organization, and institutional framework of the labor market in thirteenth through sixteenth century Holland.